

The Trap of Spiritual Materialism

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by Edwina Shaw; [UPLIFT](#)

Can Spirituality Feed Your Ego?

‘Spiritual materialism’ is a term first used by [Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche](#), a Tibetan Buddhist teacher who came to the United States in the early seventies. In his book *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, Trungpa expounded on his theories of how the ego likes to use the spiritual path for its own ends, and the mistakes seekers easily fall into in their quest for enlightenment.

The problem is that ego can convert anything to its own use... even spirituality. ~ Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche

In the west, we have come to think of our spiritual quest as ‘self-improvement,’ which is all well and good, except what is the self? Ego.



Especially in the west, where we are conditioned from an early age into [individualism](#) and material accrument, it is easy to impose these ingrained structures of understanding onto spirituality as well. We can collect courses and retreats and practices like medals, or childhood sports trophies, feeding our ever-hungry egos. “Look at me! Look how much I’ve given up, read, invested in my spiritual life!” As if this spiritual search somehow makes us better than the person beside us; who feels no need to meditate every day or do an hour’s asana practice or sit at the feet of a guru. But in all of us, the spiritual path unfolds.

Whether we are aware of it or not – our soul is growing and finding its way. It is only when the ego grasps hold of this search and uses it to feed itself that we are in danger of falling into the trap of spiritual materialism.

The Three Lords of Materialism

Trungpa discussed how these spiritual errors fall into three misunderstandings, stemming from the materialism inherent in Western cultures. He called these the ‘Three Lords of Materialism.’ The first of these is ‘physical

materialism', where the belief that owning and accumulating more and more will bring us happiness. Yet, even when we attain what we first desired, we always yearn for more. In this sense, dissatisfaction accompanies every purchase. It is the yearning that must be addressed.

The second Lord is 'psychological materialism', where we believe that a certain faith or belief system will be the cure to all our ills. We fall in love with Buddhism, for instance, and think that if we throw ourselves into the practices with enough vigor, we will be able to evade suffering. Yet, we still suffer. We may strike upon an idea or a political party or cause that momentarily seems to relieve our burdens. But this relief is only momentary. We are still living in the world and the religion or idea, or whatever it is we've latched onto so enthusiastically, doesn't stop challenges from arising.

The third Lord is 'spiritual materialism', the belief that a certain state of mind or spiritual practice will set us free from our daily troubles. We may seek to remove ourselves from the world through overusing meditation or breathing techniques, or by living in a drugged-out haze. Escaping. However, at some point we have to stop meditating or the drugs run out and the world again intrudes and the suffering we sought so hard to evade is back in our faces, louder and harder than ever. Life keeps on happening, no matter how hard we try to block it out. Shit still happens.

The Ego – A Projection of the Mind

Trungpa taught that these three Lords are based on the idea that the ego is real, that it is something to be tamed or trained, when in fact, it is constantly changing and does not exist in itself, only as a projection of the mind. If we feed it and build our sense of self around our spiritual practices for instance, then we are only feeding what doesn't exist. Anything that feeds into this false self of ego will ultimately cause us only more suffering.

So what are the warning signs and how do we find our joy and relieve our suffering, without falling into the trap of feeding the ravenous ego? God knows!

Navel gazing has often been derided, though of course, it is necessary to examine one's mind and motivations, but when the focus becomes one of boosting the self, narcissistic or self-aggrandising, then we know perhaps it's time to stop looking inwards and turn our attention out into the world and set an intention to serve the good of others. Though, that too, can feed the ego – look at me, being so good giving up Christmas with my family (which I really hate anyway) to serve food to the homeless – aren't I a good person? Just bringing an awareness of our true motivations is enough.

If we find ourselves jumping from one fad, one teacher, one book or idea to the next, hoping for instant enlightenment, or healing, that's another trap. Unfortunately, there isn't an easy way out; the work of living continues as long as we live. We can find ways of being that help us to embrace all of it more completely, without judgment, but there is no cure for life except death. Even enlightened beings grieve when someone they love dies. We all feel pain.

The Trap of Competing

That leads me to another trap on the spiritual path, one that I recognize as my ego's favorite – my suffering is worse than your suffering, my bliss is greater than your bliss — comparison and competition, inherent in capitalism but of no use whatsoever in the quest for living more peacefully. We all suffer, we all find our bliss. Be aware of the ego grasping for fuel. If you find yourself dwelling on your own sainthood, then perhaps it's time for a reality check. Sooner or later it will come to you anyway. If you catch yourself talking only about your latest spiritual teacher, book or practice, trying to enlist others to the cause – look closely at yourself – are you 'selling' it? If we're selling something, then we've probably tipped over into spiritual materialism.

That's not to say you can't write a great book about the search for happiness, or provide healing services for a fee, it's only a caution to ensure that the heart of your practice remains centred in being of service, not of serving your own need for a big fancy house and a brand new car.

Be aware also of buying into quick fixes, super-gurus and anything that promises instant enlightenment or a cure for what is missing in our lives. Perhaps these things do happen but the reality is, we each have our own path unfolding within us for the entirety of our lives. Even when we reach some kind of peace, events will still happen that shake us to the core and strip away all we'd fought so hard to attain.

In the West, we have a bad habit of appropriating the spirituality of other cultures, borrowing the rituals or

practices we enjoy, mixing and matching without really thinking about the culture or history that shaped the path. Picking a little of this and a little of that, like a pick-and-mix lolly bag, collecting without due consideration. Accumulating. Treating the practices of other cultures with respect and care is important.

Language Clues

The words we use when referring to our spiritual paths give us clues as to whether we're falling into the trap of ego identification through spirituality – spiritual materialism. If we're using words like buy and sell, attain and lose, and win, and more and greater than, less than – words of judgment, separation, and acquisition, then we're probably in need of a wake-up call.

Chögyam Trungpa said:

[Spiritual materialism is to] deceive ourselves into thinking we are developing spiritually when instead we are strengthening our egocentricity through spiritual techniques.

What Then is Spirituality?

How can we approach our spiritual paths without falling into these traps? Awareness is key, and then once we are aware, focusing not only on ourselves and our own healing but on somehow serving the greater good. True spirituality, for me, means experiencing life as it is, while at the same time experiencing that part of ourselves, and of others and the universe itself, that comes from a higher source and connecting with that source in whatever way works for us.

Trungpa's writings about spiritual materialism serve to wake us up from the trick we all play on ourselves of feeding the ego through self-improvement. Instead, he shows us a far brighter reality, the true joy that involves letting go of the ego and just being, here in the moment, riding the waves of life as they rise and fall.

We use our spiritual search to build a sense of self as a 'spiritual person,' a falsehood and deception, or the seeking of enlightenment as a means of escape. We've all met people who are hooked on Vipassana retreats, come out from each one glowing, but then a few weeks later are stumbling and lost once more, searching for another fix of their spiritual drug.

<https://www.riseearth.com/2018/03/the-trap-of-spiritual-materialism.html>

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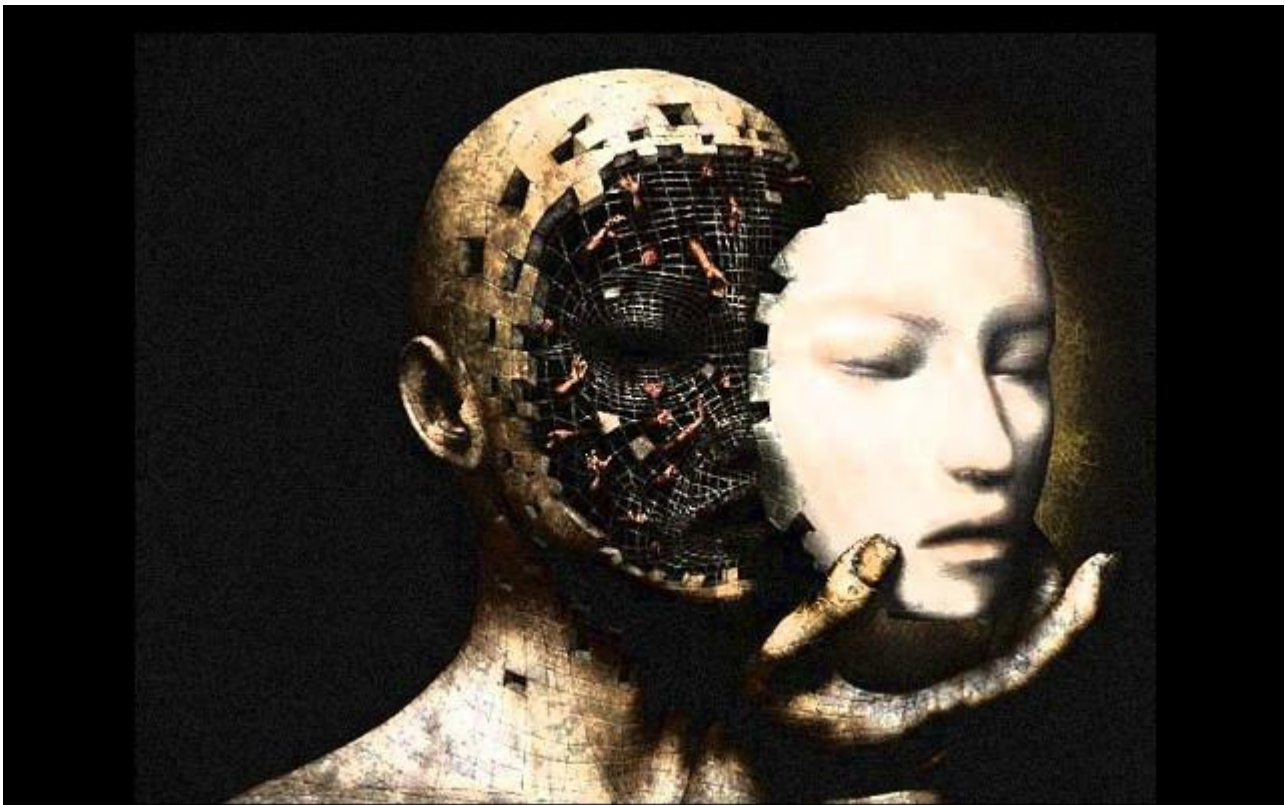
by Edwina Shaw; UPLIFT (<http://www.riseearth.com/2018/03/the...terialism.html>)

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... This is where the adjective "objective" comes into play in "objective reality". It means that reality is not just a part of our minds, but exists as some outside fact that we can reference.

Source:

<http://objectivism101.com/Lectures/Lecture22.shtml>

Re: The Trap of Spiritual Materialism

👤 Posted by **Merry Mom** ([here](#))

👤 Posted by **The Freedom Train** ([here](#))

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"How woke are you?" is a current trend.

When I first heard this phrase, I thought it meant something like how aware are you of the extremely high level of deception that is currently foisted upon citizens by the government-media-industrial complex? When I found out that most people seem to think that the "woke" question equates to "How narrowly do you follow the path of political correctness that encourages humans to be defined by their superficial physical traits?", I was quite surprised!

Blimey I didn't know that - I thought "woke" was used by millennials to describe what they perceived to be attainment of a certain level of spiritual awareness.

Now you know! I was the same way, until I heard many millennials use it in the context of criticizing people who don't agree with them about gender or race. Here's one definition from Urban Dictionary:
"Woke

A state of perceived intellectual superiority one gains by reading The Huffington Post.

Ali is so woke. At brunch she explained how wearing anything other than Chuck Taylor's or Tom's is really a microaggression. Hey did you get your Amy Schumer tickets yet?"

That's a good observation about the "woke" meme. My understanding of the original post in this thread is that "spiritual materialism" describes more or less intentional uses of spirituality for egotistic reasons.

It's my opinion that the "woke" meme and similar movements represent a stagnant level of spirituality. People believing they're so right and informed that anyone criticizing them must be wrong.

The more interesting thing is that "woke" is slang for "awake", which is a word with deep potential meaning.

Just some years ago in 2012 the word "awaken" was a big thing and the deeper meanings that can be associated with it were more so reaching the masses. The problem is that for a deeper, spiritual, meaning to reach the masses it has to go through many layers. It gets diluted along the way.

So it becomes less about inner work and finding the meaning of these words like "awaken" for ourselves, changing ourselves in the process. It becomes more about finding a coveted word or label. Being part of the right "side" or movement.

That's always been a problem with spiritual messages and teachings brought into the collective. Even the deepest messages become slogans and bumper stickers. You might say the words and messages are meaningless in of themselves, they are transient carriers or lines of connection that hopefully get us in touch with a deeper source/meaning.

There are those who believe simply knowing a phrase and associating with the right group/label makes them "awake" or evolved. Anyone who's done their self work knows that to simply use a label is not the same as exploring what such a word like "awake" means to them as a sovereign being.

There's a lot to be said about the dangers of obvious false spirituality, the wealthy TV preachers and new age gurus bilking the masses are examples of that. There's also an element of stagnant spirituality we have to watch out for. The hubris of our own minds to assume we're "there" and not having done the difficult work to transform ourselves. One can be asleep while believing they're awake, ironically using their material ego to think that they're awake.

The danger in the modern world is not that there are people who believe they're awake. It's easy to think that one is awake, or evolved, or special. There's always been people who exemplify that trap and it's a test to not to become lulled. To be "spiritually" awake so the matrix can't reduce you to a label. We see this in the "alt media" which has more and more been associated with the "alt right"-something easy to itemize and dismiss by anyone looking to disregard ANY alternative media. Again, just back in 2012 the "alt media" was less political and more about the bigger picture.

So the danger is that it's so easy these days to believe that one is "woke" or so special they've attained a coveted status. Which puts the mind to sleep, because if we believe we're already "there" there's no reason for doing the difficult work.

The facsimile of truth, of spirituality, has gotten so refined that it's more difficult to avoid its trap. There's no automatic "red pill" (another hashtag) that we can take to avoid that. It requires self work, there has to be a desire to awaken not presume it.

If there's any solution to the facsimile it might be to withdraw from it as best we can and constantly push ourselves in our self work.

Parent Post

Last edited by Universoul; 26th March 2018 at 01:44.

<http://projectavalon.net/forum4/showthread.php?102030-The-Trap-of-Spiritual-Materialism/page3>

SPIRITUAL NARCISSISM

V. Gunnar Larsson

There is no doubt in my mind: Ken Wilber is a spiritual narcissist and has been so for a long time. His [last outbursts on his critics](#) is just the epitome.

In the beginning of the seventies **Chogyam Trungpa** wrote an excellent book, *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, which has become a classic. Since then we know that most of so-called spirituality, East and West, is just that: spiritual materialism, the feeling/thought that if I do this or that I'll get, achieve or add something to myself as an individual. Today it goes hand in hand with consumerism, the core belief of modern society and international capitalism.

Now it's time for a new Trungpa to write a book on an other but related subject, i.e. SPIRITUAL NARCISSISM which has become an accepted phenomenon in some spiritual circles in the West, especially in the US.

Spiritual narcissism is the feeling/thought that 1) I'm a spiritually advanced being, enlightened, third tier etc. and 2) because of that I deserve love and respect.

Of the outstanding thinkers of today, with whose writings I'm familiar, **Ken Wilber** is an absolute favorite. I have learned more from him than anyone else. And I have followed him from Ken 1 to Ken 5 with excitement. In spite of this there is no doubt in my mind: KW is a spiritual narcissist and has been so for a long time.

His [last outbursts on his critics](#) is just the epitome. As good a proof as it gets. His reactions are pretty much the same as those of the alcoholic who, in general, is oversensitive even to the most stupid criticism, reacts to it by paranoid rage which he or she rationalizes easily and seeks, at the same time, approval for the whole thing from the co-dependents – and gets it more often than not.

This is a sad state of affairs. But it is not a surprise.

The tone of the dialogue in *What Is Enlightenment?* between the guru and the pandit, Andrew Cohen and Ken Wilber, was from the very start: If you admit that what I say is great, I'll admit that what you say is great, too. Mutual spiritual narcissism.

And before supporting Andrew Cohen – who has never been able to accept any criticism in his own sick community while being highly critical of almost all others than Himself and his followers – it took Ken Wilber more than 20 years to see and admit that his main guru for a long period of time, **Adi Da/Da Free John**, was a dubious spiritual narcissist (who would deserve a special chapter in the book on this subject.)

And as can be found in Wilber's own writings: to follow a narcissistic, charismatic teacher for a long time, we have to be unaware of our own narcissism. By following what we believe is great we desire to be part of the greatness ourselves. Secondary narcissism.

Ken Wilber is a revolutionary thinker. It's therefore inevitable that he gets all kinds of criticism. Some of it is valuable, some obvious misunderstandings, some pedantry and some just beyond the pale, even slander. But what makes this so irritating? Why is the best of all living pundits wasting his time and energy on what he feels stupid?

Sigmund Freud was as outstanding as KW. He was, of course, only partially right as KW has said about himself and all others many times. But he was tempted to create a movement (based on and promoting his theories) in which dissidents were not welcome and all critics, good and bad, ignored. In the beginning this movement was really promising. But little by little it grew into a belief system, and

now it's just a corpse cared for by a few dogmatics.

After having been an independent scholar and a prolific writer for 30 years, Wilber has now created a movement (based on and promoting his theories) in which dissidents are not welcome, the "good" critics applauded and the "bad" ones blasted. The followers, as in Freud's case, give their consent for various reasons. And the dogmatics are already in sight.

Why didn't Freud react to at least some of all the criticism he got during his longstanding career? Arrogance? Maybe. But so what? I prefer to believe that he was just responsible enough not to waste his time and energy on the folly of his uncountable opponents. With other words: he never identified his sensitive person with his work to the degree that he saw deadly enemies all around, whom he had to crush for his own sake and that of the movement – fortunately for his great contribution to psychology and the evolution of humanity.

Some of the writers of this website seem to think that everything is evolving except that old bastard Ken Wilber. My point of view is more optimistic and, I think, more realistic. Without being a psychic I see Ken Wilber overcoming his emotional shortcomings, returning to what he is good at and, eventually, writing an excellent book on spiritual narcissism which he will then be able to understand and explain better than anyone.

So in all my sadness there is no lack of hope and good wishes.

Comments containing links will be moderated first, to avoid spam.

<http://www.integralworld.net/larsson.html>